

LEARNING FROM BIBLE BOOKS

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When a man moves to a new job with a new company he has to learn about that job. He will learn in several ways. He may be taken on a survey of the whole company where he will meet the people, get acquainted with the physical plant and see the whole operation. Next, he may learn more thoroughly the procedures and personnel in his department. Another level of learning will be detailed instruction on how to run the four-color press he will operate.

Each method of investigation was from a different vantage point. Learning about his job from these three approaches would give him a better understanding of it.

Our understanding of the Bible can be enriched by using various methods of Bible study. Studying books as a whole helps one see the total message of the book. Detailed study of a passage helps to carefully understand and apply what the author

is saying in a given text. Word and topic studies enable the reader to begin to acquire a more in-depth knowledge of the basic concepts God has revealed to us in Scripture.

The Bible is the Word of God. James says "receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls" (James 1:21). The inspired Word of God provides what is necessary that "the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work" (I Tim. 3:17). The psalmist emphasized the necessity of knowing God's Word:

How can a young man keep his way pure?
By guarding it according to thy word.
With my whole heart I seek thee;
let me not wander from thy commandments!
I have laid up thy word in my heart,
that I might not sin against thee (Psa. 119:9-11).

Learning from your Bible is essential to your spiritual growth.

Every Christian can be a Bible student. There are no Bible scholars who have mastered the Bible — just some Bible students who have been studying longer or more effectively than others. Chapters seven through ten will present three methods or approaches to Bible study that will help you learn from your Bible.

God has revealed Himself and His will for man in the Bible. God has appointed no special official interpretation of the Bible. He designated no college, publishing house, or book as having the authoritative interpretation of the Bible. Each Christian should bring a desire to learn God's truth, the spirit of an honest investigator, the willingness to work, and a heart that wants to understand and obey.

INDUCTIVE STUDY

One has read correctly when he has understood the author's intended meaning. Readers must let the facts give them the ideas.

Let the words themselves supply the meaning. This approach to study is sometimes called inductive because it does not assume a meaning and then go to the text and try to make it say that. As Bible students it is not our job to create or originate truth, rather it is our responsibility to discover and understand the truth that is already in the text.

In reading the Bible we must not start with conclusions and then search for scriptures to prove our point. Of course we usually approach a subject with some thoughts already formed about the matter. It is best when we realize what our starting opinions are, then openly and honestly look at the evidence to clarify and correct our thinking on the subject in the light of the facts.

A Bible student should not start with an official statement of what the text means. Rather he should look at all the data in the text and seek to understand what it means. "Just as a detective studies the scene of a crime to gather clues as to what has actually happened, so the individual student examines all the relevant material that he has to seek to uncover the truth of the passage" (William C. Lincoln, *Personal Bible Study*. Bethany Fellowship, 1975, p. 21).

Common sense demands that we look at all the relevant facts and then from them draw our understanding as to meaning. Learning from your Bible by practicing this approach to searching the scriptures will result in "rightly handling the word of truth" (II Tim. 2:15).

INDUCTIVE BOOK STUDY

Gaining an understanding of a Bible book as a whole is important because originally it was written to real people in a specific historical situation. Studying the whole book forces the reader to see each part of the book in the light of the context of the historical setting and the overall theme of the book.

It is common to study a book verse-by-verse. While this is a

valuable and important method it can result in losing sight of the forest because of attention to a few tree branches. Some of the following methods of book study could be used as a good introduction to verse-by-verse study.

In an inductive study of a Bible book one reads the entire book in each study session looking for specific things. The desired data are recorded on paper as the book is read. The book will be read several times looking for different information each time. Shorter books work well with this type of study because they can be read quickly.

Inductive study of Bible books is profitable for individual personal study. Group study can be exciting following this approach. The leader makes the assignment of what to look for in the reading of the book. The class period consists of students sharing the fruits of their research. The leader does not lecture on the book, rather he guides the discussion as the students share what they have found from their reading of the book.

In this chapter five methods of learning from a Bible book are described and then illustrated from the book of Galatians. Choose a short Bible book. After the description of each method is read, study the chosen book according to that method.

SEEING THE WHOLE

It is best to begin a book study by reading through the book several times. The first reading should be rapid reading seeking to learn the main thrust or central theme of the book. The book should be seen as a whole without worrying about details.

A second and third reading will help one clarify the main theme, see the basic outline of the book and perhaps find a key verse. It helps to record these findings on paper. With each reading the overall picture grows clearer.

Reading the book of Galatians in this fashion yielded the following information:

The theme for the book of Galatians might be Christian Liberty, or Justification by Faith, or Walking by the Spirit. Possible key verses might be Galatians 5:1 or 2:20. The book falls into three divisions with two chapters in each:

Defense of apostolic authority — 1 & 2;

Explanation of justification by faith — 3 & 4;

Practical application of Christian freedom — 5 & 6.

It is important not to rely on anyone else's theme or outline. Each student should read the book himself. He must decide what he believes is the theme, key verse and basic outline. In this way each person learns far more.

QUESTIONS ABOUT THE BOOK

Learning about the historical background of a book enhances one's understanding of it. The entire book should be read again looking for answers within the book to the following questions: Who is the author? To whom is it addressed? Where was it written? When was it written? What type of literature is the book? Why was the book written?

Other scriptures may shed light on the historical background of a book. Center column references may guide the reader to related passages. A Bible dictionary provides information on a book's historical, geographical and cultural background.

From the book of Galatians we know the churches of Galatia were addressed by Paul the author. We learn of the changeableness of the people in Galatians 1:6; 3:1,10. The study of Galatians in the light of Acts 13-18 helps one in investigating the time and place of writing. The book deals with the problem of certain Jewish false teachers who opposed Paul's gospel and insisted that one must be circumcised and keep the law in order to be saved. Paul combats this false teaching by defending his

authority, by explaining justification by faith, and by showing that Christian liberty is neither legalism nor license.

PERSONS IN THE BOOK

Biographical material is important spiritual food. God filled the Bible with history of the lives of people. Personal examples can lead us to recognize our sins and motivate us to repent. They can help us avoid pitfalls. They can inspire and challenge us to walk the high road of holy living. Principles can be learned by observing persons.

In a biographical study of a book one should read through the book noting facts about every person or group of persons mentioned. All the biographical information should be gleaned from the book and itemized under each name. Lessons can be drawn from these personal examples.

The book of Galatians contains much biographical information about Paul. In the first two chapters he makes an autobiographical defense of the authority of his message. Almost every verse of chapter one throws some light on Paul as a person. Paul refused to be a men-pleaser, but stood boldly for the truth. He was concerned for the poor. Many other lessons can be learned from Paul's life as revealed in the book of Galatians.

Note the following verses for other biographical information: the Galatian people (Gal. 1:6; 3:1; 4:10,12-15; 4:17; 5:7; 5:10,12; 6:12); Barnabas (2:1,9,13); Titus (2:1,4); Peter (2:7,9,11-16); James (2:9,12); John (2:9).

TOPICS IN THE BOOK

In the course of a book certain topics and subjects recur. In topical study of a book one should select three or four doctrinal topics in the book, these topics should be listed as headings on

sheets of paper. As the book is read one can itemize under each heading all the information in the book under each heading. Statements should be read in context. The goal of topical study is to reconstruct the unified teaching of the book on each topic.

The Galatian letter deals with doctrinal issues. Much can be learned by researching for what is taught about God, Christ, Holy Spirit and salvation by faith and not works of law.

In a topical study of Philippians, joy would be a natural choice for a topic. The topic of joy could be subdivided in this way: characteristics of joy; things for which Paul rejoiced; and circumstances in which one should rejoice.

Collecting the teaching of a book on a topic is only a means to the end of understanding what God says on that subject. Meditation and understanding of the truth leads us to accept his truth in our hearts and to decide to practice this truth in daily life.

PRACTICAL LESSONS FROM THE BOOK

In practical and devotional study the reader looks for lessons, principles and guidelines. One should make two headings: 1. Lessons for living with our fellowman; 2. Lessons for walking closer with God. These practical and devotional truths overlap with material studied in the other methods and reinforce them in the reader's mind.

The first two chapters of Galatians have insights on fellowship, remembering the poor, receiving a preacher, answering false charges, and dealing with false teachers and those falsely taught. Chapters five and six have many lessons on how not to treat one another as well as the right attitude and actions in our dealings with our fellowman.

Wonderful instruction for godly living is found in verses such as these: "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself

for me" (Gal. 2:20). "Do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love be servants of one another" (5:13). "Walk by the Spirit, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh" (5:16). "Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Look to yourself, lest you too be tempted" (6:1).

Studying Bible books in the manner suggested in this chapter is exciting and edifying. With each rereading new truth is discovered which was overlooked before. As one reads looking for specific information his eyes are opened to what the book says on each topic much more than in casual reading. Give this method a try, it will add variety and depth to your Bible study.

Study Questions

1. How can one be enriched by several methods of Bible study?
2. What does this chapter say is essential to salvation and spiritual growth?
3. What percentage of Christians should be Bible students? What percentage of Christians are Bible students? Why?
4. Describe inductive study.
5. Compare inductive study with the work of a detective.
6. What is the value in studying a Bible book as a whole?
7. How can one make an inductive study of a Bible book?
8. List and briefly describe each of the five methods of studying a Bible book.
9. What is the value of biographical study?

10. Why should one reread a book several times while he or she is studying it?

Project

Choose a short Bible book and teach it to a small group Bible study, a Bible class or one's family. Follow the approach described in this chapter. You may want to select a very short book like Titus or Philemon.

Be sure you clearly tell the class members what to look for in each reading of the book. Let each participant express to the whole group what he or she has discovered from reading the book. Motivating everyone to participate is the key to the success of this kind of study. Help each person learn the joy of discovery. In the class discussion it is profitable to learn from what others have observed that which you may have missed in your reading.

